

Religion and Society: Effect – Counter-Effect and Social Responsibility in Central and Eastern Europe²³

In starting my presentation off, allow me to say that it is more and more apparent in European thinking that there is no chance for peace between cultures without peace between religions. However, – as this is the most important and maybe I or we should start talking from here on about this – why there is no peace between religions, societies, or continents, and what is that peculiar oddity in the whole world that the message of the Gospel – “What God has joined together, let man not separate.” – does not seem to come true. The marriage of religion and politics cannot be dissolved. That is what I would like to talk about in a few thoughts.²⁴

When we talk about Central and Eastern Europe, it is not too clear what do we understand under this term; the situation is a bit mushy and blurry. One thing is sure, though; this cultural region can be discussed as one region for many reasons. Let me enumerate the reasons. The first reason arises from retrospection to long centuries throughout history. This region – as Jenő Szűcs or Bibó and others, Hungarian authors have evidenced – is one that grinds between the wheels of the enormous hegemonies of the world: those of the West, the East, the South (or the Osman), and the Western Christian, the Eastern Christian and the Muslim hegemonies. There are a few countries in this region with ancient and solid historical roots, which are grounded in stable social relations that have continuity. We rather have emerging and disappearing societies. We do not understand each other. We cannot speak Russian, our English is not the best, we forgot the German, and we did not even learn Latin. This obviously manifests in a continuous search for identity and in making sacrifices for this purpose.

The radical social change that took place about twenty years ago enticed a few of us with a few illusions, but these did not necessarily come true eventually. One such illusion was that religion is done, and not only “God is dead”, what is more, religion is dead. Many might have thought this because communism did not show its religion-friendly face for a long time; it did not have one like that. We could have seen for a long time in Western Europe how secularisation, radically shrunk to the thesis of “reduction of religion”

22 András Máté-Tóth, Head of Department of Applied Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Szeged

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through increasing modernisation, worked. We thought that the Western European atmosphere is not far from us. Religion is not dead; however, it did not resurrect either. Many thought that after the so-called Transition there is going to be a religious renaissance, churches will be full once again, and two more people will need to be hired to count donations with the Sacristy clerk. However, not only the ideas about religion failed to come true.

It is a fact that between 1989-1991 Central and Eastern European countries have more or less dressed themselves into constitutional, democratic robes, but these rather fit them as strait jackets, thus far. The logics and culture of following the path of the sole true truth, of enforcing the sole true truth through police or public power or by any means whatsoever is very much present, we can be convinced.

Eventually, we even thought, here in Hungary as well that the beautiful innovative democracy that we had will maybe resurrect. We believed that we may be able to find the lost thread that the tempest of history tore from our hands. In reality, however, we are living the time of permanent transition.

What I would like to talk in a deeper context is the territory of State, politics and civil society. I would like to demonstrate that after the first wave of the transition, we are in the second wave today, and also how we can analyse the difference between the first and the second wave in terms of the relationship of religion and publicity.

I call the first period the Post-Totalitarian Crisis Period. Every Central and Eastern European country places its beginning elsewhere on the timeline. In Hungary, it does not coincide with the Transition, maybe we should place its beginning to the mid '80s; those brave can also place it to 1956. In the Czech Republic or Czechoslovakia we can say 1968, but we could also mention Charta '77 as well. In Poland we can say 1980 in the spirit of solidarity, or we could say the Gdansk Uprising in 1970, and so on.

This is followed by a phenomenon I call Stability Line. This means that in all three areas of publicity, the public space, such democratic structures, laws and regulations appeared that have – so to say – anchored the transition. In an all-encompassing manner, I refer to the structures established in these countries as National Democratic Conditions because they are determinative. These provide the main tune, alongside which the band can play dissonantly, but these are nonetheless the heart, with which the players play: a heart belonging to the nation. Just because I speak in Hungary, I do not mean to use the term “nationalism”; however, I would like to point out that in professional circles this devout point of view canonising the national point of view is called nationalism. Nonetheless, in Hungary, this term has such a bad ring to it that I do not want to use it at this point.

Now, let us look at what is going on with the State. At the time of the Post-Totalitarian Crisis, forging State sovereignty was the most important task of the State. The Churches – i.e. the large, historical Churches – obviously struggled very much to help ground this. We might also say that the State erected Jacob's Ladder, on which we can go back and forth between

Heaven and Earth towards security and sovereignty, but the Ladder only had one branch and it needed another one: this was the branch provided by the historical Churches. The mainstream large Churches in every society, in Serbia the Serbian Orthodox, in Russia the Russian Orthodox, in Bulgaria the Bulgarian Orthodox, in Poland the Catholic, and in the Czech Republic the atheists, have supported this.

Then the Stability Line is also very significant from the point of view that the freedom of religion was set forth in the constitution, even laws were enacted regulating the social status of Churches, and the “sobering up” of Churches began. They realised that they are only capable to sustain their institutions from a budget; however, this budget was in the hands of the State. The Churches heavily awakened to another spiritual mission, namely that a spiritual anchor needs to be cast in this disarray, thus they became the preachers of remembering God, with different levels of success, according to the traditions of their respective denominations.

In the field of politics, primarily meaning the public activities and logics of party politics and of large social movements, in the first period, we experienced the establishment of the multi-party system, in the form of a mere virtual multi-party system in the beginning, as pointed out by our political scientist colleagues in very elaborate and convincing fashion. There were more parties, most of them being successor parties, and even from the side of the voters, since they did not have any experience in voting, they have many times cast their votes in an entirely unrealistic, “*willkürlich*” manner. We should rather say that the second or third parliamentary elections can be called factually democratic; this, however, is a story beyond the Stability Line.

The large historical Churches in this region primarily supported the Christian parties, the so-called C parties at first, and we could find a lot of devout Christian among politicians, getting in the parliament on the occasion of the first elections, who built their identities in the pilot flame of Christianity in the “merry times of Kádár” or sooner, later. The next change brought about a sobering up period. At once, the Churches noticed that not all C-s stand for Christianity, but it may be possible that they stand for Corruption, thus keeping certain distance is advised. The Churches realised that they might become the servants of politics – this is called instrumentalisation in professional terminology – so they retracted a little. Interestingly enough, it is not sure but may be that for this reason the so-called C parties have disappeared from the parliament of the Central and Eastern Europe. In practice, Christian Democracy lost its parliamentary footing in Central and Eastern Europe. In some countries, there are parties operating with a strong Christian rhetoric, but the exact content of this could be subject to several dedicated analyses.

At the time of Transition, and in the first wave, the Post-Totalitarian Crisis, many MPs were characterised by political conduct of personal conviction; heartfelt, risk-taking, so-to-say, existential politics arising from motivation of a religious nature. After the Stability Line political life

professionalised, more qualified people got in the parliaments. Members of Churches interested in this direction have learned more and more on how to cooperate with party politics.

Finally, the third very important component is civil society. In this domain, also in relation to Hungary, but also with respect to the whole region, it can be argued that after the transition in 1990, societies were faced with a state of deficit since one of the most important goals of regimes with totalitarian aspirations and attitudes was to eradicate NGOs and to leave Government only.

In the religious sphere, however, interestingly, the Churches were not state institutions. They have demonstrated some kind of sovereignty, and in almost every Central and Eastern European society, especially where there is Western-type Christianity, some kind of second public sphere, a public sphere of Churches, came to life in different ways – it is important to not this – but earlier than the civil, “profane” second public sphere. These were the small communities, the *movimenti*, as we use the term in professional terminology, and the different parish, vicarage communities, that are political – to use the smart term of György Konrád –, but also the symbols of independence. And then, at once, daylight shined for this independence when in East Germany, in Leipzig and Dresden masses of hundreds of thousands took to the streets and somehow ended up meeting in the vicinity of Evangelical churches. László Tóké was also not surrounded by a team of folk dancers back in the day, but by the people of the Reformed parish, and so on.

The second wave of the transition period along the line of civil society bears the feature that those personalities, who could represent political views in from of the public and still move within the ranks of civil society, are very scarce. Key figures of the religiously motivated civil sector were sucked in the party politics; we can meet them in ministries and in the ranks of the parliament. In this second wave, it is interesting that in the whole region a civil society sector was created with great impetus, by the spread of associations, foundations and the like. In Poland, for example, the number of associations increased from ten thousand to one hundred thousand – I do not even know whether there is someone there who is not a member of one -; however, these associations dealing with politics are almost exclusively the long arms of certain parties, and they do their fundraising for their operations by knocking on the door of the party cash desk, not on the doors of the public. Another very important characteristic is that the civil sector shrunk to activities involving mental hygiene. It became vaster in quantity and volume, but as for its activities, it shifted directions towards social and mental hygiene services. This obviously relates to privatisation, already in terms of culture and religion, but also to the fact that tenders and funds on the European level as well as in local budgets are published and accessible for faith-based communities only for such purposes.

Summing up, in closing the circle, what I wanted to say is none other than we have to see that in these societies, the influence of religion and

its presence in undisputable in these three above areas of publicity, but a question mark is there as well, i.e. we do not know what religion is for in this region. We see that from time to time we can use it for politics, but politicians more and more often need to find different tools to win over the masses. We can also see that religious leaders tend to relinquish cooperation with politicians.

As a final conclusion, I feel it to be true that social peace, going forward, creativity, and calm are only possible if we create opportunities for this between religions as well – I think all of us who sit here are also convinced on this. In order to achieve this, a very important prerequisite is to know what religion is for in the public sphere of society in all three above areas, and from the side of religion, we should know what politics is for. I am convinced that churches need to learn, politics needs to learn, and then we can all start to figure out together what us, professionals need to do.